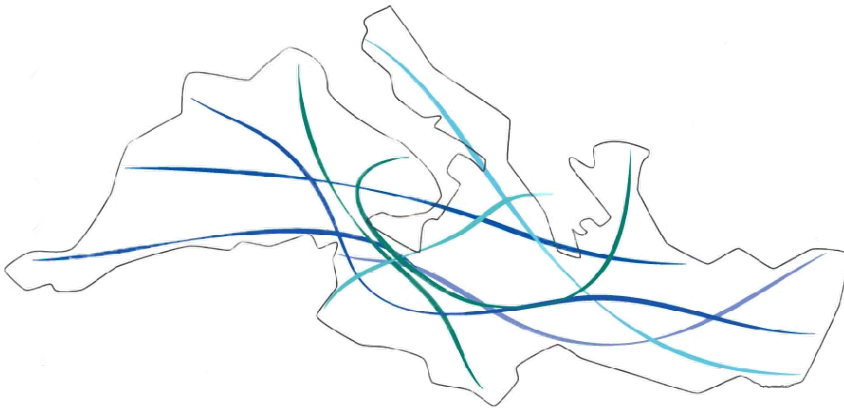


JOURNAL OF MEDITERRANEAN KNOWLEDGE

Editor in Chief, Giuseppe D'Angelo

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“The ocean is bridged”.
The Italian Great War in the diary of
Gino C. Speranza (1915-1919)



ISSN: 2499-930X



MEDITERRANEAN KNOWLEDGE
International Centre for Studies & Research
www.mediterraneanknowledge.org

Stati, C. (2021). "The ocean is bridged". The Italian Great War in the diary of Gino C. Speranza (1915-1919). *Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge*, 6(1), 9-33

DOI: 10.26409/2021JMK6.1.01

Retrieved from

<http://www.mediterraneanknowledge.org/publications/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

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Article received: 11 February 2021

Accepted: 22 April 2021

On the cover: *Routes* by ISIA Roma Design

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Via Giovanni Paolo II n. 132, 84084 Fisciano, Italy



- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN
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“The ocean is bridged”. The Italian Great War in the diary of Gino C. Speranza (1915-1919)

Abstract

During the Great War, Gino Speranza (1872-1927), a lawyer and journalist, second generation Italian American, left New York for Italy with his wife, Florence, as a correspondent for the newspapers “New York Evening Post” and “The Outlook”. Along with the work as a journalist, he soon started to collaborate with the American Embassy in Rome. When the United States joined the war, he volunteered to work in the office of the Military Attaché at the Embassy, becoming later, on a proposal by Ambassador Thomas Nelson Page, an Attaché on Political Intelligence. The diary he left us (published posthumously by his wife), still largely ignored by the historiography, represents an important source not only as an account of the life of the country during the First World War, for the accurate description of the morale of soldiers and civilians at the home front, for the description of cities of art, but also and above all for the study of diplomacy and relations between Italy and the United States.

Keywords: First World War, Transnational Studies, Italian Americans, Migration History, Italian American Relationships

“The ocean is bridged”. La gran guerra italiana en los diarios de Gino Speranza (1915-1919)

Resumen

Durante la Gran Guerra, Gino Speranza (1872-1927), abogado, periodista e italoamericano de segunda generación, salió de Nueva York junto a su pareja Florence como corresponsal de los periódicos “New York Evening Post” y “The Outlook”. Además de desempeñarse como periodista, Speranza empezó pronto una colaboración con la Embajada de Estados Unidos en Roma. Cuando EE.UU. entraron en la guerra, trabajó como voluntario en la oficina del Agregado militar de la Embajada y más tarde el embajador Thomas Nelson Page propuso que fuera nombrado Agregado de servicios secretos. El diario que nos deja, y que su esposa publicó póstumamente, ha sido casi totalmente ignorado por la historiografía, pero representa una fuente importante no solo sobre la vida italiana en los años de la Gran Guerra por las descripciones exactas de la condición del moral de los soldados y de los civiles en el frente interno y por la de las ciudades de arte, sino también y sobre todo por los estudios de la diplomacia y de las relaciones entre Italia y Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: Primera guerra mundial, Estudios transnacionales, Italoamericanos, Historia de las migraciones, Relaciones entre Italia y EE.UU.

“The ocean is bridged”. La Grande guerra italiana attraverso il diario di Gino Speranza (1915-1919)

Sinossi

Durante la Grande guerra, Gino Speranza (1872-1927), avvocato e giornalista, nonché italo-americano di seconda generazione, partì da New York insieme alla moglie Florence in qualità di corrispondente dei giornali “New York Evening Post” e “The Outlook”. Oltre a svolgere il lavoro di giornalista, Speranza iniziò presto a collaborare con l’ambasciata americana a Roma. Quando gli Stati Uniti entrarono in guerra, lavorò come volontario nell’ufficio dell’Attaché militare dell’Ambasciata e in seguito, su proposta dell’ambasciatore Thomas Nelson Page, divenne addetto ai servizi segreti. Il diario che ci ha lasciato (pubblicato postumo dalla moglie), ancora largamente ignorato dalla storiografia, rappresenta una fonte importante non solo sulla vita del Paese durante la Prima guerra mondiale – grazie all’accurata descrizione del morale dei soldati e dei civili nel fronte interno e per la descrizione delle città d’arte – ma anche e soprattutto per lo studio della diplomazia e delle relazioni tra Italia e Stati Uniti.

Parole chiave: Prima guerra mondiale; Studi transnazionali; Italo-americani; Storia delle migrazioni; Relazioni tra Italia e Stati Uniti.

“The ocean is bridged”. The Italian Great War in the diary of Gino C. Speranza (1915-1919)

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*Nationalism, after all, is a form of extreme individualism,
and individualism is deeply rooted in the Italian character.*
(Gino C. Speranza)

Introduction

Gino Charles Speranza, “perhaps the most prominent Italian-American public intellectual of the early twentieth century” (Guglielmo, 1999, 169), represents “the dilemma of the second-generation American reformer in 1920s” (Salerno, 1996, 143). An influential representative of the Progressive Era, during his career as a lawyer, in the years before the outbreak of the First World War, Speranza had always tried to reach a mutual understanding between native and immigrant. Before departing from New York to Europe in 1915, he had been “one of the city’s most articulate lobbyists for immigration reform and one of America’s earliest proponents of cultural pluralism” (Pozzetta, 1983, 48).

Speranza was born in 1872 in Bridgeport, Connecticut; his father was a specialist on Dante who had come from Verona to teach at Yale University and then at Columbia University. As a young man, he spent 9 years in Verona where he received part of his early education. Speranza then graduated in 1892 at the City College of New York and obtained a Law degree two years later at New York University. He soon specialized in International Law, pleading the case of hundreds of immigrants. He was particularly interested in investigating their working conditions (his most celebrated case

concerned the mobbed Italian miners in the West Virginia coal regions in 1906). From 1901, he served as secretary for the Society for the Protection of Italian Immigrants whose “great success rested upon the willingness of American reformers, Italo-American progressives, the Italian government, and Italian citizens to cooperate in a concerted drive to uplift the Italian urban poor in America” (Iorizzo and Mondello, 1971, 100-101). In 1912, Speranza gave up his successful law practice to concentrate fully on his writing career for a “systematic interpretation of Italy to America and of America to Italy” (Livingston, 1941, XIII) and to provide additional time to volunteering, becoming involved in the *Scuola d’Industrie Italiane*. In these years, in a series of articles, he investigated many different aspects of the Italian immigration experience, explaining the nature of immigrant institutions such as the mutual-aid societies, Italian language newspapers, immigrants’ banks and religious festivals, but also dealing with crime, the Black Hand and Mafia (Pozzetta, 1983, 61).

When the Great War broke out, Speranza began to write freelance on Italy-related issues and when the Italian Kingdom joined the Allies he journeyed to the peninsula as a correspondent for the *New York Evening Post* and *The Outlook*. Alongside the work as journalist, very soon he collaborated with the American Embassy in Rome. From April 1917, when United States joined the war, he volunteered to work in the office of the Military Attaché at the Embassy, becoming later, on a proposal by Ambassador Thomas Nelson Page, an Attaché on Political Intelligence with the specific task “of keeping the American Embassy and the State Department informed as to Italian events and policies, and especially as to currents in Italian opinion” (Livingston, 1941, XV).

However, Speranza’s cultural pluralism was transformed during the war. Speranza personally experienced the parable of President Wilson in Italy: at the beginning, Speranza had enjoyed “immense popularity”, then the friendliness “came to an abrupt halt in March 1919 when tensions over President Wilson’s stand against Italian claims to Fiume and other territories boiled to a fever pitch” (Pozzetta, 1983, 62). Speranza was attacked in the Italian press that accused him of being “a paid agent of Jugo-Slav imperialism” and a Americanizer of Italians in New York. At the same time, his

opinion was no longer considered credible by the American government, so much so that one of his report on the Italian situation was accompanied by a note that called him an "Italian nationalist propagandist" (Rossini, 2000, 189) and Speranza ended up considering himself "persona non grata" (Peragallo, 1949, 204). Despite the enthusiasm permeating the conclusion of his diary, the differences between Italians and Americans now appeared to Speranza less easily reconcilable. The outbreak of post-war nationalism in Italy and elsewhere that threatened the Wilsonian world order disillusioned Speranza who became convinced that essential differences existed between America and Italy and, therefore, the rest of the world. Returned home, in the early 1920s Speranza wrote a series of controversial articles for the *World's Work* and other anti-immigrant magazines, which were compiled in the book *Race or Nation. A Conflict of Divided Loyalties*, published just a year prior the 1924 "Immigration Act" that would have introduced quotas for specific countries based on 2% of the U.S. population from that country as recorded in 1890. Speranza unpredictably became a militant supporter of Americanization (defending the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant stock) and a more restrictive legislation on citizenship: "long study, observation and thought" (Speranza, 1923, 31) had wholly changed his views. Speranza, who throughout his life had suffered from illnesses, died in 1927 for a pleurisy at 55. As Pozzetta argues, "the intellectual odyssey followed by Speranza was, in many ways, a reflection in microcosm of what was then transforming the American society" (Pozzetta, 1983, 63). But even though he "rejected his Italian ancestry to become an American ethnic chauvinist" (Salerno, 1996, 144), his assimilationist position should not obscure the work he had accomplished on behalf of Italian immigrants.

During his stay in Italy, from August 1915 to April 1919, he wrote over sixty articles which then he gathered together with notes and travel photos in a volume never published entitled "Avanti Savoia" and preserved among the Gino Speranza Papers at the New York Public Library. His personal diary, instead, was collected and edited by his wife, Florence Colgate, in 1941. The diary is an accurate and emotionally dense description of the spirit and feeling of life in Italy during the war, a diplomatic account of the activities of the Embassy

and an external look over the Italian political figures made by an observer who owns the tools to decode it. That is why it is worth, especially today, as part of a reborn multilateral approach in Mediterranean-Atlantic relations, to consider it as a valuable source for those who want to approach the study of Italian Great War and diplomatic relations between Italy and the United States during those years. This essay will try to offer some thematic routes to better understand the structure and purpose of this two volumes diary.

In the opinion of Arthur Livingston who wrote the biographical introduction on its author, the diary, unlike the articles written by Speranza, where “the political writer, working on the Allied side of the battle lines, had to pretend that all was sweet and idyllic in the relations between Italy and her three great Allies”, reflected fewer limitations and was more spontaneous and true and could also count on a ton of information since that, unlike the Second World War in whose progress the book came out, “a vast area of free observation and of free opinion still was left” (Livingston, 1941, XIV). Among the reviewers, Bernadotte E. Schmitt, Modern European History professor at Chicago University, argued that “no more penetrating record of any belligerent country during the war of 1914 has, in fact, been published. He saw and wrote always as an American and never allowed his genuine sympathy for Italy to overcome his desire for truth.” (Schmitt, 1941, 559). Constantine Panunzio, writer, and Sociology professor at University of California, claimed instead that “the momentous events of the first World War are described with detachment and remoteness, serenity and calm” but the author “does not describe events he himself has participated in or observed directly; he gives reports of reports, most of the action is that of others”:

A feeling persists that Mr. Speranza sees without having seen the events or felt the pulse of the people’s lives. Also, one wonders whether perchance the loving hand of the editor has not robbed these pages of some of the forcefulness which characterizes Mr. Speranza’s other writings. Undoubtedly the reticence, dignity, and good taste of these pages will delight some readers, but most Americans who will read these volumes will probably consider them somewhat distant abstract, cold, and having an aura of labored nicety (Panunzio, 1941, 224-225).

Speranza's diary, "interesting both for the richness of the political-diplomatic news on the war period, and as a singular example of 'travel in Italy', along non-traditional itineraries" (Durante, 2005, 50), can be easily juxtaposed to Salvatore Cotillo's memoir (Cotillo, 1921), and to the pages that Fiorello La Guardia and the already mentioned Costantine Panunzio dedicated to the war in their biographies (Panunzio, 1921; La Guardia, 1948), with the difference that Speranza was not sent along Italy as a "speaker" by the Wilsonian Committee on Public Information, as Cotillo, La Guardia and Panunzio did, but remained quite detached from the propaganda work pursued by Wilson and to which he looked with some detachment never joining that "great machine of journalists and professors" come "to advertise the United States in general, and Wilson in particular as a figure of Holiness and Righteousness" (Speranza, 1941, II, 153).

1. Italian Americans and their "dual allegiance"

Gino Speranza and his wife leave from New York on August 12, 1915, embarking on the steamer *SS. Taormina* together with about nine hundred people, mostly Italian reservists who come from every part of the United States. From the outset, the sentiment that Speranza resents towards his country, which has decided to remain neutral, emerges: on board there is also the Third Secretary of the American Embassy in Rome and Speranza ironically argues that "if we are torpedoed, to concentrate our efforts while drowning on keeping his head under water. We want to make a clear case for Mr. Wilson" (Ibid., I, 3). Further on, he wonders if "while others are fighting for principles as necessary and sacred to us as to them, will our country, our great country, look on and deal no brave, stout blow?" (Ibid., I, 9).

The enthusiasm of the Italian American passengers (even the most Americanized) going to Italy to respond to the "sacred duty" emerges explicitly in Speranza's pages. "Yesterday, - Speranza asserts - these young men were solving the problems of industrial America; today they are going to fight the battle of freedom in Europe; tomorrow, perhaps, they will police the peace of the world"

(Ibid., I, 3). The journalist tells, for instance, about two boys: on one hand, a young from Connecticut, who naively believes that “all the men there are like sons of Victor Emmanuel”; on the other, a guy from Minnesota, a “lost soul”, darker in his predictions:

I don't know why I am going to Italy [...] for I don't know Italy and do not speak its language, and my parents and friends are in America, where I have an excellent position. My mother used to tell me, when I was a little boy, of her father and uncle who were placed against a wall and shot down mercilessly because they refused to fight against Garibaldi. (Ibid., I, 5)

After their arrival in Italy, at the end of August, the Speranzas move to Florence, which will remain the main seat of their Italian stay, in particular residing in a house immersed in the countryside of Fiesole, “a little valley of sweet delight” (Ibid., I, 153), at least until the spring of 1917, when Speranza will be officially appointed Secretary of the Military Attaché of the Embassy in Rome. To be noted in these days are the visits to some hospitals, such as the American Hospital for Italian soldiers in Villa Modigliani (Speranza himself will be included in the General Board as a member). Among the patients he meets two *Americani*, as he calls the Italians of America:

One of them returned from Pittsburgh some years ago to join his wife and children in Southern Italy. “Had I known that all this was coming, I would have stayed in America”, he said quite positively. The other, a bright boy of native intelligence from Avellino, a laborer for eight years on the railroads in “Boston, Mass.” is suffering from a wound in his arm but is not at all dismayed by the prospect of returning to the front. (Ibid., I, 19)

With some of these, Speranza will come into contact during his years in Italy, both in person and by post. His personal method of identifying an *Americano* is both physical (by the “gold fillings in their teeth”!) and psychological (he has “more go than the stay-at-home Italians and the impress of a wider horizon, more confidence in himself as the captain, or should I say the corporal, of his soul”, Ibid., II, 47). The main theme of Speranza's reflection on Italian Americans – which also appears in some of his articles (Speranza, 1916, 1917) –, the “dual allegiance” for their mother-country and for the United States, derives from his direct experience. In one case, one of these

boys, though arrived in America as a child, he had not asked for naturalization:

You don't think of taking out papers when you grow up with other boys, work in the same shop, belong to the same union, go to the same church, and do the same things. [...] I was only eleven when my brother sent for me to come out to him. He was a foreman in the shops, and everybody knew him; so the boys took me right in. [...] It is a kind of confused in my mind. A couple of years before the war the nearest Italian Consul sent me a notice to report at the Consulate and be examined for service as a soldier. It's the law over here, you see, and everybody fit has to serve. I didn't pay any attention to it, for I thought of myself as an American. But when the war broke out, things looked different to me. Even the boys thought I was doing right when I told the boss I was going over to the fight. (Speranza, 1941, II, 48-49)

Even though the distinction between Italian and American citizenship to most of the returned emigrants to whom Speranza speaks seems "vague and unreal" (Ibid., II, 165), the issue was serious and a diplomatic one. On September 22, 1915, Speranza writes that the government of the United States was "anxious to bring about a citizenship convention with Italy that will regulate the military and civil status of naturalized Italo-American citizens, but the Italian Foreign Office wants to know what the *quid pro quo* will be, and there appears to be no *quid*" (Ibid., I, 30-31). And on February 18, 1916 he asserts:

A new and serious question has arisen between Italy and America, the refusal of Italian authorities to allow the wives of some native Italians to join their husbands in America, because these men, who are naturalized citizens of the United States, have not answered Italy's call to arms. The holding of innocent hostages seems to me so mediaeval a weapon that I cannot believe Italy will use it. (Ibid., I, 180)

When he is appointed assistant at the Embassy, one of his first suggestions given to Ambassador Page is about the urgency to press the Italian Government to solve the issue of citizenship, a theme that Speranza had already placed in some of his writings and that he would continue to consider fundamental even later and that perhaps was the basis of his subsequent changed approach to the problem of aliens in the United States:

Approximately one million naturalized citizens of Italian origin in North and South America, who have not responded to the Italian call to arms, are going to become

criminals unless their status is regulated by a change in the *lex sanguinis*. Classed as technical deserters, they will become detached from Italy – indeed they are selling their holdings here – and an element in reducing Italian exchange abroad after the war will be lost. (Ibid., II, 26)

2. *The War in Wounded Soldiers' Words*

Speranza's diary contains a series of valuable and thought-provoking first-hand descriptions of the war life in the trenches, collected from the hands-free voice of the protagonists. The first impression that Speranza records on the war is provided by a wounded man he meets on the train from Venice to Florence.

The Italians are good fighters, but *chiassosi* to a degree. The very moment when they ought to be hiding themselves from the enemy, they stand still and shout "Savoia!" like madmen. On a charge, however, they are irresistible and generally sweep everything before them. [...] On the other hand, there are men in whose eyes you see the fear of death as clearly as you see the rigidity and whiteness of their faces, and, yet, they do not run away. Those who fail at the front, not through fear, but from sheer inability to stand the noise and excitement, often become insane (Ibid, I, 103).

The meeting on the train of some soldiers will be a constant in his diary, a sort of *topos*. He is impressed by the sight, on one hand, of the trains that go to the North "bursting with joyous songs and battle hymns", and on the other, of "long trains, impressive and ominously still, slip silently southward, bearing the freight most precious of all to the nation – the wounded of soldiers of Italy" (Ibid., I, 104). In one of his casual meetings, Speranza talks to an "emaciated *sottotenente*" wounded on Mt. San Michele by a missile which grazed and opened his stomach e that despite this now could not wait to return to fight. A character possessed by bellicosity, "his eyes shone and sparkled as if with fever", that describes Italian soldiers in the most animal-like way:

Feed them, give them plenty of tobacco, a little wine, and they keep perfectly fit. Courage isn't necessary. They acquire it in action. There is no denying that everyone feels afraid before a charge, but the most cowardly man jumps out of the trench like a new being at the battle cry "Savoia!" [...]. If the Teutons win, we shall become slaves. We mustn't forget that. (Ibid., I, 364)

Another description of the trench is that made by a soldier in convalescence whose feet had been partially frozen by icy water. According to him, in the first lines of the trenches

the soldiers stay for a period of five days, living as best they can, sometimes in fifty centimetres of water, which has been known to wash away the soles of their shoes. Food is irregular; sleep is almost impossible; and the vermin are maddening. After a turn in the trenches, they are allowed a rest in the *trincerone*, back of the lines, where they enjoy the certainty of meals and the comfort of being dry, for, at the worst, only a few drops of rain trickle through. (Ibid., I, 133)

The report of the moments preceding an attack on the front is striking and so is the candid admission that if the attack fails, there is nothing left but to run back or seek shelter.

The planes go out to reconnoitre, the artillery sweeps the trenches of the enemy for several hours to clear away obstacles, and then the Genio goes forward to cut wires and place bombs and nitro-glycerine tubes. As soon as all is in readiness, the officers shout "Avanti Savoia," and the men spring out of the trenches and make a dash for enemy. "A man gets terribly frightened and goes ahead only because the officers lead - otherwise he couldn't. The noise, the explosions, the cries of the wounded for their mothers are so terrible that it seems as if one were to lose his mind, and by the time the Austrian trenches are reached, everybody is ready to spike the first man he encounters". If the soldiers succeed in reaching the points where the entanglement of wire has been cut, the charge is generally successful. If it is a failure, "Si salvi chi può" becomes the order of the day, and everyone rolls, runs, or creeps back to the Italian lines as expeditiously as possible, or drops into some hiding place while the artillery belches forth a curtain of fire to cover the retreat and stave off a counterattack. (Ibid., I, 134)

The effects of the war on the combatants and the shock caused by the fighting appear during a visit to an hospital where, during the Christmas holidays, "a bell summoned the soldiers to wind up the festivities with marsala and *brioche*" and "one robust-looking Tuscan peasant" suddenly resents the ringing of the bell.

It made him nervous, he said. This little incident reveals the state of "shock" often lurking behind the normal appearance of these men. "We must keep merry," said this man. "We must not think of battles. Those who do, go mad. For weeks after I left the front, I dreamed about it. I do still." (Ibid., I, 140)

During the war, Speranza visits several other *Ospedali di Riserva*, for example on January 18, 1916 he tells of a soldier met at Villa Biondi, also in Tuscany,

a Reggio-Calabrian, tall and dark, a former railroad employee, was practicing walking on his artificial leg and rejoicing in the promise of a suitable position, which will enable him, with the help of his pension, to support himself and his parents, both of whom are over eighty years of age. (Ibid., I, 156-157)

While in another hospital he meets “a Sardinian, a fine-looking young man, minus a leg” who is hungering for home and has told his family that he is only suffering from vertigo.

A sweet-looking boy, with one leg gone, said smilingly, “A leg is less than a life. I think I shall be able to do light country work; so I can’t complain.” A Sicilian, sitting up in a bed, avidly eating a hearty meal fed him by a nurse, was the perfect embodiment of Sicilian *fierezza*. The stumps of his arms, for he had lost both hands, stood out strong in immaculate dressings; his chest and head were bandaged and one eye was lacking, but the other shone out of his scarred face, bright, steady, firm and undaunted. [...] Never have I seen such life and strength as I saw in the one eye of that shocked face and in that broken frame. (Ibid., I, 401).

3. *At the front*

In April 1916, Speranza obtains his first permission from the Supreme Command to travel as a journalist to the front. He is not alone, with him there are also other correspondents including Ambrosini of *La Stampa*, Cantalupo of the *Catholic Trust*, Baskerville of the *New York’s World* and Lapido of Montevideo’s *La Tribuna*. Before arriving in the war zone, he is at Udine, the city seat of the Supreme Command that he describes with these words:

The town is very busy, as busy as if it were in midst of a *fiesta* and soldiers are everywhere, spending their little all on this trinket. All the articles on sale bear testimony to the fact that men can be soldiers and children at the same time. There is everything to fit out a man for war and everything to please the child in him: views, postcards, souvenirs, jewelry, jokes, and candies. (Ibid., I, 217)

During his trip to the front, Speranza passes through Aquileia from whose bell tower he enjoys a dramatic panoramic view: to the east and south Monfalcone, Trieste, Miramare, Belvedere, and Grado,

to the northeast Doberdò and Sels, Monte Sei Busi, San Michele, Podgora and the "beautiful heights adjacent to Gorizia which have cost Italy blood and given her new glory; and in the background, the red Carso, redder ever under the light of the setting sun, upon which Italians endurance has written a record of imperishable names and heroic deeds" (Ibid., I, 226). In the small town of Gradisca, walking around, he does not see "nothing of human life except the shell of its social expression: roses blooming on shattered walls, white-flowered chestnuts towering majestically over roofless houses [...] churches with great doors nailed fast, public buildings, schools, and orphan asylums, with awnings in shreds, doors ajar, and shutterless windows staring at the sky. [...]". But even in the midst of desolation and ruin, Speranza catches a glimpse of "Italian geniality" in a "young soldier who is carrying a flask of ruby-red wine in one hand and a bright rose in the other. Gradisca may be buried alive, but the kindly care of the Italian soldiers will keep its heart beating until it is restored to the sun and joy of life" (Ibid., I, 232-234).

At San Giorgio di Nogaro, Speranza visits the *Università Castrense*, established by Giuseppe Tusini, professor of clinical surgery at Modena, for the purpose of allowing medical students called to arms to complete their course of studies.

On the lower floors of a school building, converted into a field hospital, are housed the insane and cases of "mental confusion" resulting from the shock of war. In its small wards nine hundred men have been comfortably cared for and treated during the past four months. The two main forms of derangement are the melancholy and the psychomotive or extension of battle excitement. As an example of the latter Professor Tusini cited a sergeant who cannot banish from his eyes the picture of the head of his commanding officer being shot off. The cure consists in rest and the use of some opium. (Ibid., I, 241)

In the tiny village of Saletto, under Austrian influence until recently, Speranza explores one nursery, established for little children of the neighbourhood in a hayloft next to the village church, where, according to the two countrywomen in charge, their efforts "are rapidly being transformed them from 'gente selvatica' into civilized children" (Ibid., I, 246-247). On May 6, instead, the trip to Adamello begins.

Ascending with short even step the path that winds and winds in its skyward course was an endless line of soldiers laden with muskets and supplies, and descending were lines of stretcher bearers, carrying the wounded and sick or dragging sleds upon which lay men in the delirium of fever or figures, strangely still, wrapped in great blankets, bound perhaps for the little field of soldier's crosses at Temù. (Ibid., I, 253)

After two hours of walking, Speranza and the others arrive at *Rifugio Garibaldi* and the following day, in the middle of an alpine storm, they reach the *Passo di Brizio*. To guide them is a colonel, so self-confident that he claims that he is able to “furnish supplies to any number of mountains posts, even though a snowstorm or a glacier confronts him” (Ibid., I, 254) and who “seemed to know just when and where we should encounter this or that *corvée*, for the ascending and descending file of men keeps its daily schedule with almost clocklike precision”. “As a mariner steers his ship on the trackless sea, so does this officer lead battalions of men on altitudes where vegetation ceases and even stout-winged birds dare not to come” (Ibid., I, 256) Speranza pointed out. The journalist transcripts about the soldiers of this front area and their effort in the mountain war:

They must be fed, sheltered, and kept up to fighting scratch; they must be housed, rested, medically cared for, and munitioned. Guns must be mounted on dominating heights and kept in readiness, and all parts of this icebound region must be held in constant and living connection by telephone and signaling devices. Every smallest item, every wheel and pulley of the huge but precarious mechanism erected on it must be carried by hand up precipitous paths, over snow-drifted passes, and across the desert wastes of the glacier. (Ibid., I, 254-255)

When they arrive at the pass, they finally meet “picturesque-looking men awaiting their turn for medical inspection”.

Their faces, unshaven, bronzed black by the *tormenta*, were almost distorted from exposure, but their eyes, clear and gentle, grew keen and interested when they heard we were newspaper men come to write of their deeds. They all asked when the war would end. An oldish man uttered the only complaint, if complaint it can be called, that I heard on our long trip. “Fortunate they who died early in the war – they did not have to bear our hardships”. (Ibid., I, 255)

The journey to the front continues in the following days to Monfalcone and the sector of the Karst where days before there has been a violent battle.

After passing three *posti di corrispondenza*, rough huts protected by sandbags and baskets of *vimini*, filled with stones, such as one sees in old battle pictures, we reached the upper edge of the wood [...]. Then we sprinted up an absolutely bare stretch of sandy rock rising steeply out of the cruel Carsic heights [...]. Here we entered the Trincea Joffre, a rock-hewn trench with a brave name, shaped like a wide, irregular corkscrew [...]. It was held by the Brigata Napoli, composed mostly of southerners. Although shrapnel was bursting about them and shells were whizzing incessantly over their heads, they were merry a lot, chaffing and joking about the cavalry they had replaced. [...] “Where are you from?” one of them called out to me and soon I learned, as English or, rather, New Yorkese became the language of Trincea Joffre, that nearly every other man in that trench was an “Americano” [...] There we stayed for forty minutes during a bombardment in which I really saw death as it is faced in battle, waiting for better or worse. (Ibid., I, 271-273)

In June 1916, after a period of work at the American Committee for War Relief in Florence, Speranza is again at the front, this time with his wife who has moved with him to Vicenza, which in the eyes of Speranza appears as “a fine old lady leaning on a gallant’s arm” (Ibid., I, 318). In his journey on the Trentino front, he also sees the King, “small, almost badly shaped, dressed in a general’s field uniform [...] carrying a camera that seemed too big for him” (Ibid., I, 321) and from the visit, the opinion he draws is that in the Trentino, after the Austrian offensive which had taken place in May and June “Italians have now learned to fight [...] they cannot economize either in men or materials” (Ibid., I, 328).

In July 1917 he returns to the front and records a certain lowering of morale. Even though the letters written home by the men are, as a major told him, “as good propaganda as could be desired” (Ibid., II, 61), on the reverse side, on a sign giving directions how to reach a certain *dolina*, Speranza notices the words “Vogliamo la Pace” (We want peace) scratched in pencil (Ibid., II, 59) and a meeting on the train with some officers makes him understand how the discontent is growing (soon some riots break out against the high cost of living in Turin and other Italian cities). In the summer, the front appears to Speranza “so defensively impassable, so well stocked, so perfectly manned, and, at the same time, so placid”

(Ibid., II, 79). There is nothing to suggest what will happen within a few months, the defeat of Caporetto. However, Speranza, between October 16 and November 1, due to an illness, does not write anything in the diary. Starting from November, he reports that “every large city is raising funds and organizing relief for the refugees from Friuli, and patriotic manifestations are taking place throughout Italy” (Ibid., II, 97).

4. Italian Politics: a live fresco

The city is full of “influences” bad for the country, influences not directly traceable, perhaps, to German sources, but certainly turned to profit by the Germans. All the pacifists, all the followers of the old régime, all the seat-warmers, all the papists, all the petty and most of the big *affaristi*, all the disappointed deputies and all the seekers after office and personal advantages are up early and late – mostly late. (Ibid., I, 125)

Even though Speranza will never get intimate with Rome, it is there that he will carry out much of his activity, meeting different personalities of the time and having the opportunity to decipher Italian politics, by attending parliamentary debates on several occasions and by talking directly with some of the protagonists. At the beginning of his Italian stay, he does not spare criticism of Giolitti, with the conviction that it is not probable that his followers, as he wrote on February 1, 1916,

are actually conspiring with the Germans, and, certainly, they are not in Germany’s pay, but they are so politically prostituted that, even in this historic moment, they have their fears and interests more at heart than the destinies of their country. (Ibid., I, 163)

Instead, Speranza is less harsh towards Salandra and Sonnino.

As I looked at Salandra, whose general expression is very serene, but in whose deep-set eyes there is a light indicative of possibilities and at Sonnino, whose very brow expresses the power of his intellect, so obviously muscular are the mark of deep thought – as I looked at these two men and pondered on how they have stood at the helm for almost two years, despite the parliamentary majority against them, I thought that Italy’s citizens might well be proud of their leaders. (Ibid., I, 200)

But it is above all with Nitti and Bissolati that Speranza seems to have many more points in common. He had already met Bissolati at the front and he will describe him as a "man of ability, foresight, courage, and independence" but "well up in years" and "sapped by a long and strenuous political career and by wound received in the war" (Ibid., II, 168). Speranza instead considers Nitti "a very able modern man, the only of the Cabinet for whom the United States exists" but without character and full of ambition (Ibid., II, 160). Speranza also records the various changes of government, as during the trying days of the Austrian offensive in the Trentino, in Summer 1916, with Salandra's fall and the new government lead by Boselli and, in particular after Caporetto, in Autumn 1917, with the appointment of Orlando as Prime Minister and Nitti as Minister of Treasury.

In the summer of 1918 Orlando "seems to be at his political apogee" although in Speranza's view it is Sonnino that kind of man to whom people, "although unpopular because of his austere, pedantic, and unapproachable attitude" (Ibid., II, 176), turn in that national emergency because they trust his integrity and sense of duty. Meanwhile, new characters take the stage, including Mussolini, "fighting editor of the *Popolo d'Italia*", who is first named by the diary on December 4, 1917 and then again on June 29, 1918 when he is defined "man of vision, but more successful as a ferment and "battle cry" than as a quiet as telling organizer" (Ibid., II, 168).

In 1918, Speranza states that "never, perhaps, have the Italian people been so united about the war as since the Caporetto disaster, not in a common enthusiasm, but in agreement on the necessity of carrying it to a successful finish". However, he anticipates the crisis of parliamentarianism, which a few years later will emerge in a violent way, when he says that "Italian Chamber does not reflect this spirit" and that "despite the fact the enemy is now on Italian soil, the Chamber continues to be unrepresentative and misrepresentative of the nation-at-war" (Ibid., II, 129-130). A concept that he will resume, when the end of the war is approaching, affirming that the Italian political parties "do not appreciably shape public opinion in Italy, largely because, with the exception of the Regular Socialist Party, they are factions, not disciplined groups" (Ibid., II, 188).

In September 1918, a questionnaire from Washington on the liberal, imperialist, and social-revolutionary forces in Italy sets Speranza to “pondering on the lack of political development in Italy”. In Speranza’s view, most of Italians are liberal: “The essential temper of Italians, mental, spiritual, and political, rests on the principle of “live and let live”. Among the imperialists Speranza puts the Nationalists that, at the beginning of the war, “enlisted the support of a number of young, earnest, and active men of patriotic impulses who awakened the people and initiated the movement that coerced an unwilling and pacifist Giolittian Parliament to listen to the will of the nation and declare war [...]” and that, together with the Big Business, “aim at a “greater Italy,” a military and commercially strong Italy capable of imposing her civilization on backward peoples and opening new markets to Italian trade”. Eventually, the “social-revolutionists” according to Speranza are all members of the Regular Socialist Party while the Independent and Reform Socialists could not be defined as social-revolutionary “for they not favor decisive and intransigent international class warfare”. On the potentialities of the explosive threat of the future political life, Speranza questions himself without reaching a certain answer but with the conviction that peasants and laborers “will rebel against an unfair adjustment at the peace conference but they will accept a just peace, though they will demand and deserve infinitely better social and economic conditions than they had before the war” (Ibid., II, 184-186).

In January 1919, Speranza interviews Salandra and Bissolati. He looks favourably on both, the former because he had been able to be the interpreter of the people in 1915, with his refusal to submit to the parliament majority and the latter because he seems “the most convincing Italian politician”, “the most modern and sensitive to the rights of masses” (Ibid., II, 250). While Speranza accounts the born of the *Partito Popolare Italiano*, founded by Father Luigi Sturzo, he is well aware, on March 15, 1919, that “the hope of the new and complete Italy, which is throbbing with life, lies in the men who fought the war. What political material there may be in these young men no one knows, but it is certain that many of them feel the “call” to lead and put their ideas into effect” (Ibid., II, 274). In the meantime, the liberals try to “reform” themselves, but the country “does not want its present representatives, even though “reformed”;

it wants new men. If it cannot have the right men, it will have the wrong" (Ibid., II, 286). Speranza does not believe that this renewal can come from Bolshevism, since that "class spirit is incompatible with the Italian temperament" (Ibid., II, 295). Just few days later Mussolini decides to arrange the Trench Fighters, *Trinceristi*, moulding a political movement (*Fasci di Combattimento*) which asks for "suppression of the Senate, universal male and female suffrage, selective and proportional electoral reforms, annexation of Dalmatia and Fiume, and acceptance of the League of Nations" (Ibid., II, 281). It is the first step towards the conquest of power by Fascism, which will gradually change its skin and will write a new page in the Italian history that Speranza, however, will not witness in first person.

5. America's entry at war and Wilson's parable

When the United States is going to wage war on Germany Speranza writes: "It is the happiest Sunday of my life. [...] The United States, my country, has finally found itself". (Ibid., II, 10). On April 10, 1917 Gino Speranza entrusts to the diary his joy for which his country "has made the great decision" (Ibid., II, 24-25) and tells he has written "with some difficulty" an article in Italian on *La Nuova Antologia* (Speranza, 1917). America's declaration of war makes the occasion of an Italian demonstration of sympathy under the Embassy. Nevertheless, Ambassador Page is curt in his most intimate comment with Speranza. "Both Italy and America – he asserts –, stand for freedom and constitutional government; but at this point the similarity and even the sympathetic relations between them cease".

"Ships go back and forth between Italy and America, but there is no bridge over the waters upon which the two people may walk and meet." He uttered these words in connection with my request to him to make use of me now that my country is at war and American material in Europe may be mobilized. "You," he said, "should continue the efforts you have been making in the press to bridge this sea of mutual misunderstanding and ignorance that divides the two countries". (Speranza, 1941, II, 25)

On September 21, 1917 Speranza begins officially his duties as volunteer in the office of the Military Attaché at the embassy and in

July 1918 still remains at the service of the embassy entering this time as an assistant for the diplomatic service. United States popularity is very high. When the US declares war on Austria, in December 1917, “Rome expressed its appreciation [...] by a procession and demonstration in front of the chancellery of the American Embassy”. On that occasion, Ambassador Page, Rome mayor Prince Colonna, deputy Salvatore Barzilai and congressman La Guardia give a speech (Ibid., II, 111). However, when, in January 1918, Wilson addresses to the Congress on the “14 Points”, the issue of “readjustment of the frontiers of Italy in accordance with clearly recognizable lines of nationality” arouses a great deal of comment. Speranza reports the appeal made by the *Giornale d'Italia*, “semiofficial Sonninian organ” to Ambassador Page “to make the Italian aspirations clear in Washington” (Ibid., II, 123).

In September 1918 Speranza predicts the stalemate: “Italian policy is bound to be vacillating and uncertain; for the Italian Government cannot relinquish the claims guaranteed by the Pact of London until it negotiates a more up-to-date and perhaps more liberal, but equally binding agreement” (Ibid., II, 189). Meanwhile, he is asked to write a report on Italian views on Jugo-Slavia (Ibid. II, 192). It is not the only report he wrote: in addition to this, Speranza for more than two years had sent weekly reports on the evolution of the Italian political situation that never reached Wilson or his chief advisor on European politics and diplomacy, Colonel Edwards House, and whose lack of knowledge certainly contributed to the fact that the American delegation arrived at the Paris peace conference largely ignoring the real geopolitical situation and the real will of the Italian government (Rossini, 2000, 144; Saiu, 2003, 245-246).

The conquest of Trieste and the end of the war catches him while he is in Sorrento, looking for some fresh air to heal from his chronic illnesses.

Trento e Trieste! I found myself American enough not to be stirred to the depths by the announcement – a proof that my heart is not Italian. But I did grasp the tremendous significance of what these words mean tonight to millions of Italians. I thought of my father – what they would have meant to him. I thought especially of my mother and found pleasure in the visualization of the joy they would have given her. [...] She had seen the Austrians charge the Veronese in Piazza Brà, and she hated them with an undying hatred. (Speranza, 1941, II, 206)

After the end of the war, the “Adriatic question” assumes daily more importance. When in January 1919, Wilson is in Rome, Speranza is among the architects of his meeting with the former minister, the reformist socialist Bissolati, who had recently resigned from the Orlando cabinet and expressed a more dialogical position on the Adriatic question. Of Wilson’s visit to Rome, Speranza is most impressed by the “obstructive measures taken by the Italian Government to prevent the President from speaking to the people. [...] After the President left Rome, the government circulated reports that Wilson had a phobia for crowds; also that it feared some one might throw a bomb” (Ibid., II, 238-239).

The “parable” of Wilson, to whom success had so much contributed the “speakers” sent along the country by the branch office of Committee on Public Information in Italy, organized by Charles Merriam (Rossini, 2000, 127), was being consumed. Speranza himself questions how to communicate the American message to the masses (Speranza, 1941, II, 181) and how to persuade them about the goodness of the League of Nations proposed by Wilson (Ibid., II, 268-269). In the background there are the strikes and the protests of the first half of what will then be called “Red Biennium”, while an anti-American sentiment mounts that makes itself more access after the failure of the negotiations in Paris, the appeal of Wilson of 23 April 1919 in which he asks the support of the Italians against that of their government, and the return of Orlando in Italy in a “sad sight, empty and silent” capital, very different from the time of “America’s entrance into war when all Rome, cheering wildly for Wilson, was assembled on it” (Ibid., II, 310-311).

Conclusions

Speranza’s diary is a real “den” of impressions about Italy of the time. Word limits do not allow to consider many other fundamental issues on which the attention of the journalist-lawyer rests. I can just remember the role that art plays in the text: Speranza and his wife travel through much of central and northern Italy aboard a Ford model T and visit several cities. Over the years spent in Italy, the

diary presents a detailed account of the visit of many places of art and history: it is a journey of Italy's time, of what he defines as "the loveliest country on God's earth" (Ibid., I, 25). In Venice, in particular, Speranza will feel like being home, affirming: "I spoke the language of these people as I had never spoken it, and they accepted me as one of themselves" (Ibid., I, 84). Here he will return several times, thanks to the help of the American consul, Harvey Carroll, making friends with the archpriest of St. Mark Basilica, and will be a direct witness of an air attack and the destruction of some works of art, like the fresco by Tiepolo at the Scalzi Church. Speranza will pay particular attention to the treasures of art, following the relationship with the journalist and critic Ugo Ojetti.

The diary also presents a portrayal of the religious component: on the one hand, as Elizabeth Lynskey noted in her review appeared on *The Catholic Historical Review*, "Speranza opposed the restoration of the pope's temporal sovereignty, thought Vatican diplomacy inspired by a desire to save the Hapsburgs, and tended to look upon papal pronouncements as politically rather than doctrinally oriented" (Lynskey, 1941, 360); on the other, he is an acute observer of the most humble practices of worship of the people (such as the procession of the Day of the Dead in Venice or the Holy Thursday in Florence) and states that he wish he could "believe and practice simply a religion of such lovely expression" (Speranza, 1941, II, 305). Another theme to take into consideration, only mentioned but which appears to be fundamental to the current historiography, is that of the complete unpreparedness towards the Spanish Flu that emerges, for instance, in the tale of the visit to the small village of Tuscania, near Viterbo, whose many inhabitants had been killed by the pandemic.

The pharmacist, one may say, died at his post, with a long line of persons waiting for him to fill prescriptions. There was only one doctor in the town and no caskets. A soldier, whose two sisters died while he was at home on leave, placed the body of one in a casket he made but he could not finish for lack of materials and carried the other in a shroud on his shoulders to the cemetery. He himself died afterwards. A touching story was that of a young man and a girl, devoted lovers always. He went to the war, was wounded, and came home. While ill of the *peste* in their marriage bed, they agreed that whichever felt the end approaching should make a sign to the other to close his or her eyes. The husband gave the sign and died. His wife, who had closed her eyes as agreed, died a few days later, without having opened them

again, even to see her children. [...] There were so many orphans in the town that the surviving mothers divided their breasts between the motherless babes and their own. (Ibid., II, 297)

With the departure on the steamer *Giuseppe Verdi* on April 28, 1919 on board of which they befriend the former first lady Mrs. Edith Roosevelt, Speranza's "three years of danger and troubles" end, always beside his wife, his "Captain and Hope" (Ibid., II, 220). As the *New York Times* reviewer noticed in 1941 (though mixing past expectations with present attitudes), the diary "ends a few months after the Armistice, when already the shadow of coming events is cast upon the scene by evidence of incipient fascism. Talking with a soldier one day in 1918, Speranza heard expounded the completely developed theory that England was a decadent nation that owned the past, while Italy and Germany were young and virile and destined to inherit the future" (Brooks, 1941). The country he left indeed was about to experience turbulent upheavals but in Speranza's opinion, Italian civilization had "always presented surprising contrasts of greatness and mediocrity, of saints and rascals, of geniuses good and bad".

Its many manifestations of greatness blind us to the mediocrity always accompanying them – the same commonplaceness, shrewdness, patience, provincialism, and adherence to custom that is markedly noticeable in the Italian middle class of today. The war, by emphasizing these typical qualities of the Italian people and by bringing to the surface their latent genius for organization, has shown that Italy is the same today as it was yesterday and a thousand years ago. (Speranza, 1941, II, 32)

Speranza believed that he had nevertheless made his own contribution to ensure that Italy and the United States did not look at each other with hatred or incomprehension but instead that the war had for the first time removed the barriers, and that unlike what Ambassador Page had told him, there was truly a bridge "over the waters" upon which the two people could "walk and meet". For Speranza, who clearly could not, at that moment, imagine that American foreign policy in the following years would instead pursue an isolationist policy, this meeting was irreversible and was represented plastically by the many American soldiers who had come to fight in the Old Continent.

These boys symbolize the great, new spiritual brotherhood that will surely come out of the war. The Atlantic was not crossed by our two million men for anything less than this. Europe will call not only to their souls and spirits but to those of their children. The ocean is bridged. Europe and America become adjoining territories, with just enough of No Man's Land in between to keep up some of the romance and excitement of detachment. (Ibid., II, 214-215)

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